

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the distinguished gentleman from New York (Mr. GILMAN), the chairman emeritus of the Committee on International Relations.

(Mr. GILMAN asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me this time. I am pleased to rise today in strong support of H.R. 2540, the Veterans Benefits Act of 2001. I ask our colleagues to join in full support of this important legislation.

Mr. Speaker, the House typically passes a general veterans benefits bill each year. H.R. 2540 represents this year's benefit legislation providing several important improvements to existing programs. I want to thank the distinguished gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) for all the good work he is doing for our veterans throughout the country.

First, this bill provides for the annual cost-of-living adjustment to the rates of disability compensation for those veterans with service-connected disabilities. This new rate will go into effect in December of this year. Congress has approved an annual cost-of-living adjustment to these veterans and survivors since 1976.

Second, this legislation adds type II diabetes to the list of diseases presumed to be service connected in Vietnam veterans exposed to herbicide agents. It also greatly extends the definition of undiagnosed illnesses for Persian Gulf War veterans and authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to protect the grant of service connection of Gulf War veterans who participate in VA-sponsored medical research projects. These are long overdue benefits. It also extends the presumptive period for providing compensation to Persian Gulf veterans with undiagnosed illnesses to December 31, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, many of our veterans from the Vietnam and Gulf Wars went years suffering from undiagnosed ailments while receiving neither recognition nor treatment from the veterans health care system. During the past 10 years, the Congress made great strides in recognizing the special circumstances surrounding the post-service experiences of these veterans. This bill is an extension of that process. For that reason, I urge its adoption by the House. I want to thank the gentleman from New Jersey again for his dedicated service to the veterans of our Nation.

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the distinguished gentleman from California (Mr. CUNNINGHAM).

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Mr. Speaker, I would like to laud my colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Veterans issues are very important. Both sides of the aisle support this bill very well. But every once in a while we have got peo-

ple that just cannot stop themselves from partisan shots, and they need to be answered.

The gentleman from California said there is not enough money for veterans because we spent the surplus in tax relief. First of all, surplus is defined as the amount of money above what it needs to run the Government with a 4 to 6 percent increase. That is what this committee has done.

Secondly, the 124 deployments, \$200 billion cost destroying our military and our ability to fund things like the veterans, \$200 billion under the peacekeeping deployments of Bill Clinton. Recently, the ranking minority member says, "Well, this is a good step but we have got a long way to go." The gentleman from Missouri, the minority leader, recently said that raising taxes in 1993, he was proud of it when the Democrats had control of the White House, the House and the Senate, and he would do it again.

I think it is right to point out what those taxes were. The first part of those taxes were to cut the COLAs of the veterans. The second part was to cut the COLAs of the military. That is the wrong direction. The third was to increase the tax on the middle class which affected military and the veterans. The fourth was to increase taxes on Social Security and then take every dime out of the Social Security Trust Fund which raises the debt which veterans and military have to pay for.

So yes, I think we are going in the right direction. We do have a long way to go. Let us analyze what is the reason why we do not have the dollars to put forward that we really need. We have had 124 deployments taxing our veterans and our military. That is why I laud both sides of the aisle now for increasing those funds.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, as an original sponsor, I rise in strong support of H.R. 2540, the Veterans' Benefits Act of 2001.

One of the most important bills the Congress approves each year is legislation providing disabled veterans an annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA). H.R. 2540 provides a COLA, effective December 1, 2001, to disabled veterans and the surviving spouses of veterans who are receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). As in previous years, these deserving men and women will receive the same COLA that Social Security recipients will receive. I am pleased that we are acting to provide disabled veterans and their survivors with an annual COLA.

The bill makes a number of other benefits improvements, including the addition of Diabetes Mellitus (Type 2) to the list of diseases presumed to be service-connected in Vietnam veterans exposed to herbicide agents. The bill also requires the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs to establish a two-year nationwide pilot program to expand the VA's 1-800 toll-free information service to include information on all federal veterans' benefits and veterans' benefits administered by each state.

The legislation also contains provisions affecting compensation for Persian Gulf veterans. Specifically, the bill expands the definition of undiagnosed illnesses for Persian Gulf

veterans to include fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome and chronic multi-symptom illness for the statutory presumption of service-connection. The legislation also extends the presumptive period for Persian Gulf illnesses, which is scheduled to expire at the end of this year, until December 31, 2003.

When Veterans' Affairs Committee considered H.R. 2540, Members of the Committee had some concerns about the provisions pertaining to Persian Gulf veterans. I was pleased that we were able to sit down and work out these differences so the House could proceed with this important legislation.

I urge my colleagues to support the Veterans' Benefits Act of 2001.

Mr. GALLEGLY. Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the Veterans Benefits Act of 2001, a measure that will improve veterans' benefits, especially for our veterans who became ill as a result of their service in the Gulf War.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to say that the Veterans Benefits Act of 2001 contains many important provisions from H.R. 612—the Persian Gulf War Illness Compensation Act—which I introduced with my colleagues Congressmen DON MANZULLO and RONNIE SHOWS.

Since the end of the Gulf War, the Veterans Administration has denied nearly 80 percent of all sick Gulf War veterans' claims for compensation. In the view of many, including the National Gulf War Resource Center, the Veterans' Administration has employed too strict a standard for diagnosing Gulf War Illness.

In response, the Veterans Benefits Act includes a critical two-year extension for Gulf War veterans to report and be compensated for Gulf War Illness. In addition, the bill includes a comprehensive list of symptoms that constitute Gulf War Illness. The measure also expands the definition of undiagnosed illness to include fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome as diseases that are compensatable, diseases often mistakenly attributed to Gulf War veterans.

I want to personally thank Chairman SMITH and the members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in working with me and Congressmen MANZULLO and SHOWS in getting this critical language included in this bill. When we move into conference, I hope that we continue to work to strengthen some of these provisions, including further extending the date of Gulf War veteran can be compensated for Gulf War related symptoms.

As one of the original cosponsors of the 1991 resolution to authorize then-President Bush to use force in the Persian Gulf, I believe we must go the extra mile to take care of the men and women who went to war against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and are now suffering from these unexplained and devastating ailments.

Many of those suffering from Gulf War Illness were Reservists and National Guardsmen uprooted from their families and jobs. They answered the call, and we have a duty to help them. I urge my colleagues to vote for this important measure.

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. Speaker, I strongly support H.R. 2540, the Veterans Benefits Act of 2001.

This legislation provides an important annual cost-of-living adjustment for disabled veterans, as well as surviving spouses of veteran's who receive dependency and indemnity compensation. H.R. 2540 also makes a number of important changes to improve insurance, compensation, and housing programs for our nation's veterans.